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The Nordic Exhibition in 1888 – analyzed as a snapshot of the international exchange of knowledge and technology

The world's fairs in the 19th Century were places of knowledge exchange, comparison, and competition among nation states. On the level of the individual visitor they were opportunities of entertainment and knowledge enhancement. The 1888 Nordic Fair in Denmark was no exception. The idea was to show the progress in Nordic business and production life, and other European countries were invited to function as background for the evaluation of the state of the art in the Nordic countries.

The paper will analyze The Nordic Exhibition in 1888 as a snapshot of the international relations of Danish business life with an emphasis on the exchange of knowledge and technology. The exhibition is seen as a local spot in a global network of knowledge, technology, and goods, and it is used as a lens through which the exchange between the local and the global is analyzed.

Butter, beer, engines and decorative arts were among the things on display. In 1888, the Danish agriculture was nearly through a transformation from export of grain to export of butter and bacon. At the exhibition, this transformation was represented by a functioning dairy including another export success, the Maglekilde centrifuge. The dairy was a showcase for a Danish technology, but also an example of the practical use of the scientific knowledge of hygiene built up through the 19th Century. This knowledge was central too to another business heavily exposed at the exhibition, the Danish breweries. A new pure brewer's yeast culture from 1883 was the result of the work of Emil Christian Hansen at the brewery Carlsberg, and this yeast had spread quickly to other countries.

As on many other fairs in the 19th Century, engines, electric light and industrial machinery were among the highlights. Steam engines dominated the machine hall, however, gas motors designed by Nikolaus Otto were represented in Danish produced versions too. The engines and machinery were examples of import of technology and knowledge from primarily England and Germany to the industrial late-comer Denmark.

The initiator of the exhibition was Philip Schou, head of the Royal Porcelain Factory and a promoter of decorative arts. His main thought was that Denmark, a country without coal and iron, was unfit for heavy industry and should focus on decorative arts instead. In fact, the Danish porcelain factories had a break through at the exhibition, and their products are still today sold worldwide as Danish Design.

Nøgleord:

knowledge exchange; technology; network; exhibition; industrialization